

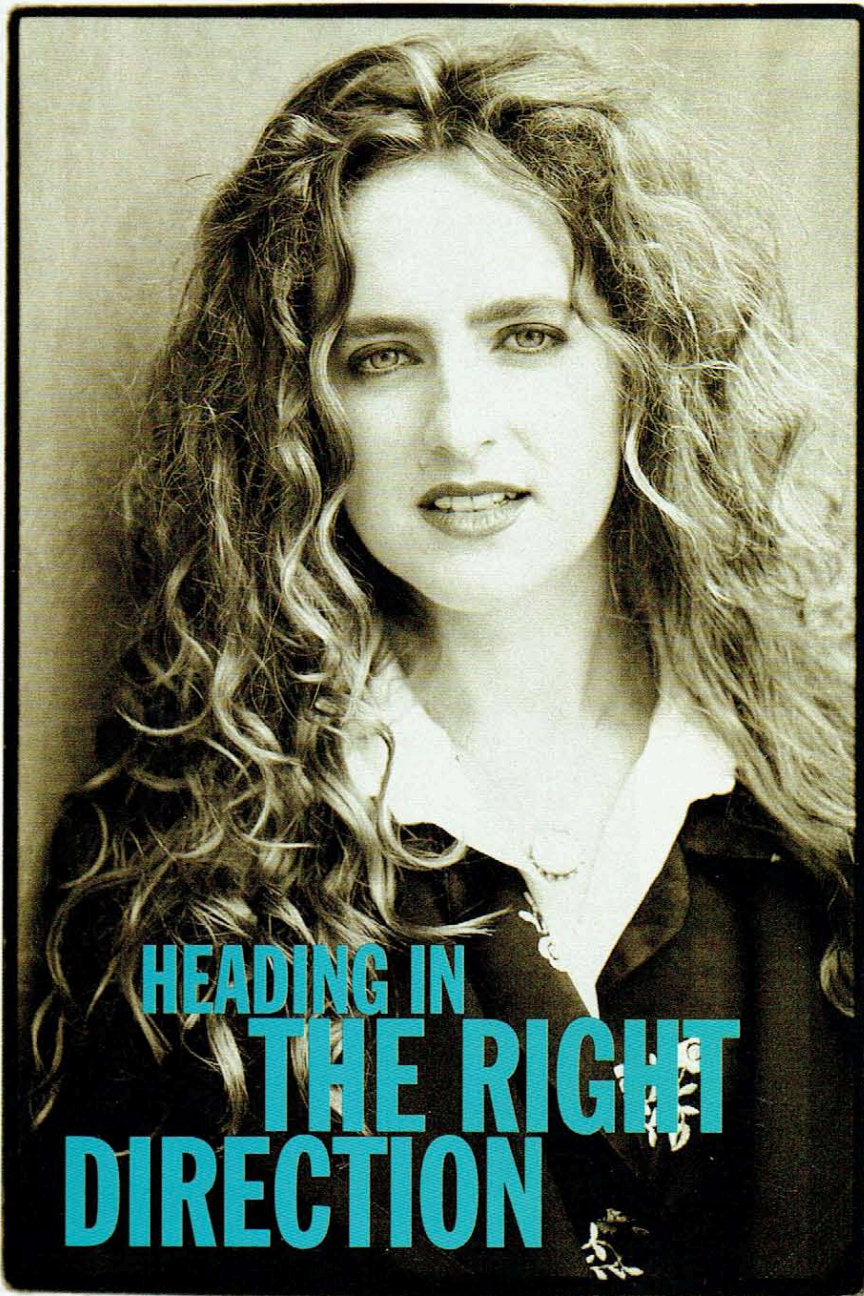
not the last laugh

Lenny Henry is playing a show at the Melbourne Concert Hall. The Trestle Theatre Company of Great Britain is staging a tribute to one of Melbourne's favourite sons, the philosopher-cartoonist Michael Leunig. Italy's fey dress-up artist, Ennio Marchetto, is returning with new, er, material. Stomp is thumping back with the added racket of sixteen local drummers. And promoter Greg Hocking has signed Steve Wright (one of the hottest American comedians of the past decade) to come to Australia's comedy capital after six years of chasing him.

Do you think it's fun trying to organise something this funny? The Melbourne Comedy Festival (from April 1 to 24) — one of the big three on the international comedy calendar, along with Edinburgh and Montreal — got down to the serious business of finalising this year's program after some nervewracking internal slapstick of its own. It was a furious fandango of factions and funding jitters. (Please stop laughing, we're feeling economically depressed down here.)

Some of the chuckles to be heard echoing around Melbourne this month may well be nervous expressions of relief, but the real groundswell of laughter should be louder than ever. A broader line-up than usual is expected to rev up the action.

Last year, about 250,000 people with a sense of humour watched the fun. This year, the net has been widened to catch those who may not traditionally frequent the inner-suburban fringe-style venues. There is more fun and games for children, and, for older audiences, shows — such as *A Tribute to Vaudeville*, with those indomitable troupers Val Jellay and Maurie Fields — have been scheduled. **Miriam Cosic**



HEADING IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION

Directors come in all shapes and temperaments, each with their own secret formula for success. For Melissa Bruce, the art is to encourage trust and confidence, in an "open atmosphere" that allows actors to give their best without fear. Her first major production, of Caryl Churchill's witty and gymnastically inventive study of "the career woman", *Top Girls*, opens at the Sydney Theatre Company's Wharf Studio on April 7.

Bruce grew up in a family where the arts were important and her quiet manner disguises a determination — not for fame and glory, but "to do good work". With some experience in stage management from her student days at Victoria College, Bruce flew to London with little more than hope in her survival kit. Before long, she was touring as a stage manager with the Royal Shakespeare Company. While she was grateful for the hard-nosed

backstage experience, directing had become her goal, and she returned in 1989 for the directors' course at NIDA. The Sydney Theatre Company offered her an affiliate directorship the following year, and has been nurturing her talent ever since. This included assisting Richard Wherrett's successful production of *The Crucible*. She also has worked with two women directors, Gale Edwards and Jules Wright.

Bruce's preference is for strong physical and visual theatre, which will be tested on *Top Girls* with its endless flow of brilliant dialogue and unusual structure, including a hilarious first act where a range of women of achievement from history and mythology have dinner together. Later, we follow the experiences of a modern career woman, Marlene (played by Linda Cropper), in a brilliant study of the pursuit of success (which she achieves, but at what price?) **JW**